

GANESHA'S SECRET

EXTRACTED FROM 7 SECRETS OF SHIVA



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Ganesha's Secret

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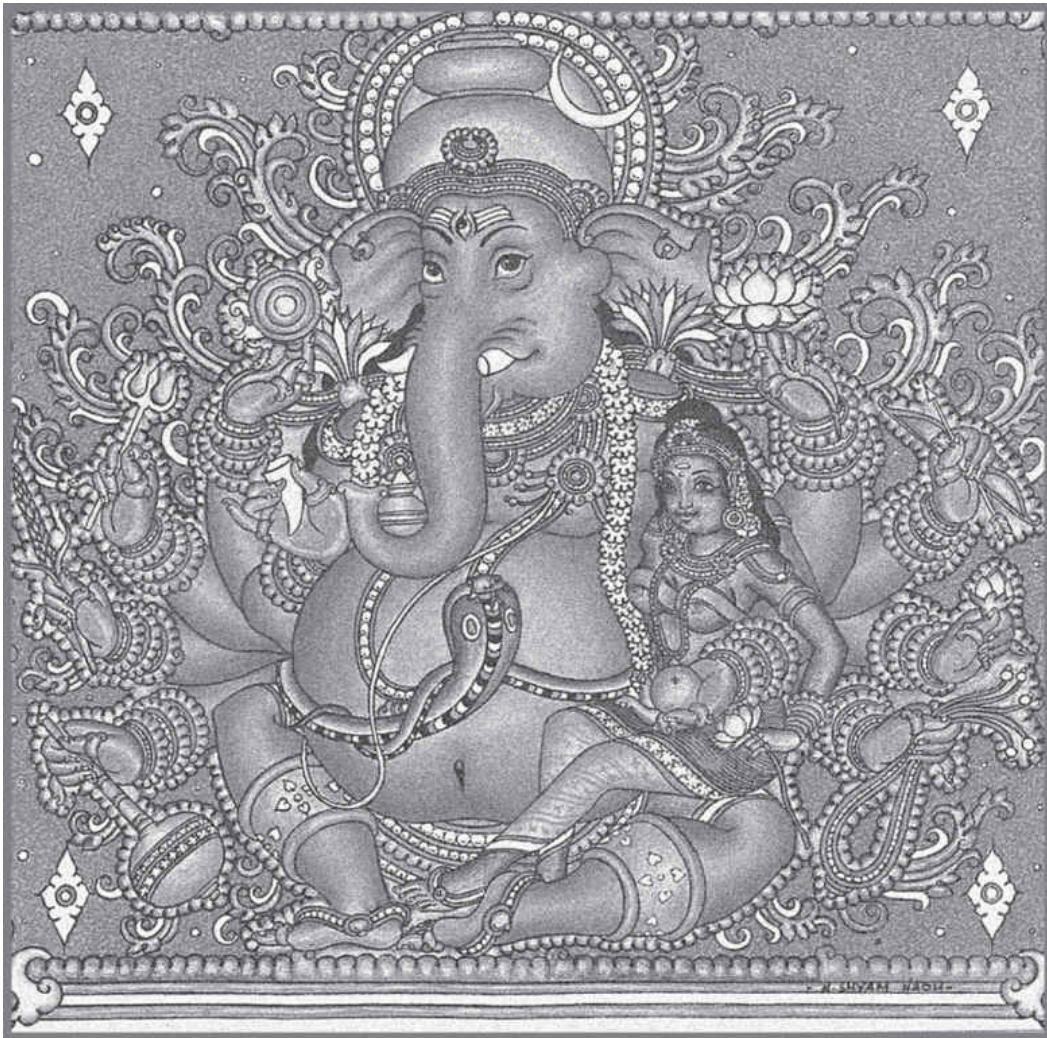
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Food alone does not satisfy hunger





South Indian bronze sculpture of Shiva as Gajantaka, the elephant-killer

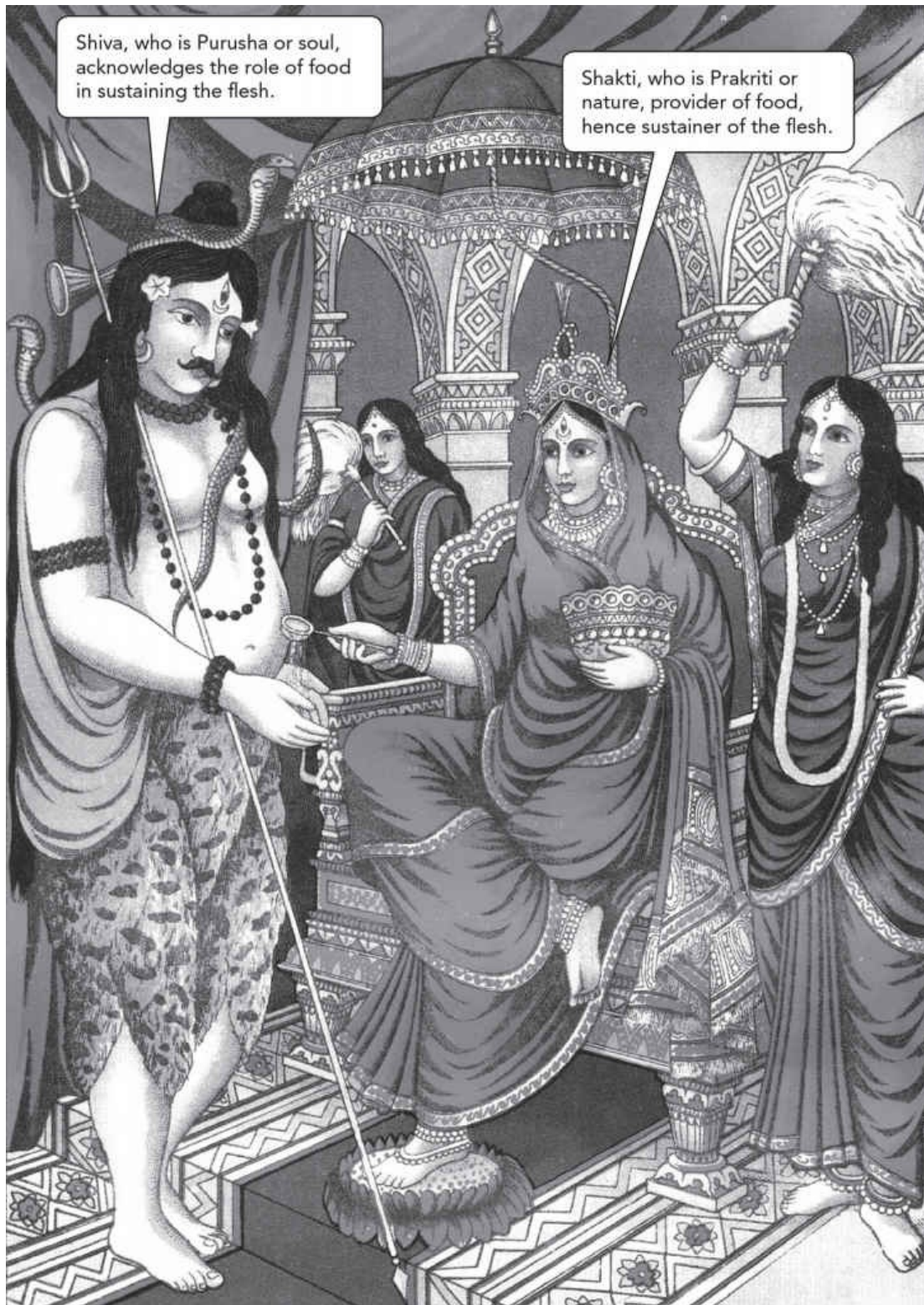
As long as the lion is hungry, the deer is afraid. As soon as the lion is fed, it forgets its fear of scarcity and the deer no longer has to fear the

predator. Food thus plays a fundamental role in allaying fear.

The elephant has access to a lot of food, thanks to its great size. And thanks to its size, it has no natural enemies. This makes the elephant the least frightened of all animals in the jungle. This makes the elephant a symbol of power. Its presence points to a rich ecosystem that is fertile and green and full of water, capable of supporting many human settlements. This makes the elephant a symbol of prosperity. Naturally, it is associated with Indra, king of the Devas, ruler of the sky and Lakshmi, goddess of wealth.

Shiva however kills the elephant. He is Gajantaka, slayer of the elephant, who flays the elephant alive, dances on its head, and wraps its skin around his body. Elephant skin is not easy to cure and tan; it is full of fat and blood and rots easily. Shiva drapes around his body this Gaja-charma or elephant-skin. This reinforces Shiva's desire to stay away from all things material. He wants to break free from nature. He does not want to even depend on Prakriti for food.

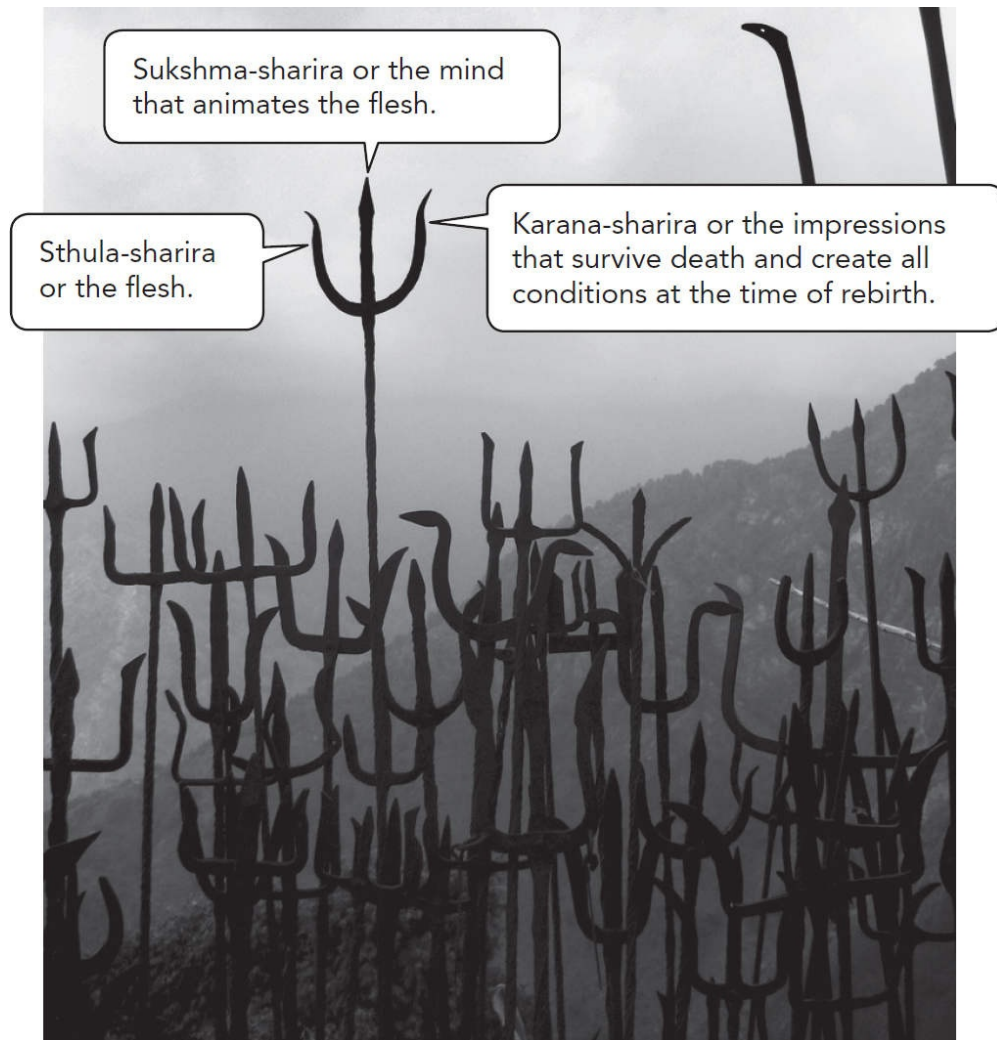
When Parvati goes about setting up her kitchen in Kailasa, Shiva does not see the point. He watches her collect fruits and vegetables and grain and spices in baskets. He watches her domesticate fire in the stove. He watches her collect water in a pot. He watches her get her pots and pans and spoons ready. Then he sneers, 'What is the point of food? Everything will one day die anyway.' In response, the Goddess instantly disappears along with her kitchen. Now there is no food in Kailasa. Shiva's Ganas weep. Food, they say, keeps the hunger pangs away. Food, they say, with its many flavours and textures, excites the senses, and helps them experience the variety of nature. Food, they say, provides contentment and allows the mind to move away from fear. Shiva feels the pain of his Ganas. He experiences what they experience. He yearns for what they yearn. He realises that these needs and cravings of the body force him to think about mortality. From fear of death stems the yearning for immortality and this yearning for immortality eventually paves the path towards spirituality. If there is no food, there is no body, no engagement with Prakriti, no encounter with Kama or Yama, no feeling whatsoever. Shiva realises how food plays a key role in the human journey from Prakriti to Purusha. He sets forth in search of his wife. He finds her on the banks of the river Ganga, in the city of Kashi, as the Goddess Annapurna, providing food to all those who come to her. Shiva extends his begging bowl. The Goddess, with great affection, fills it with hot, flavoursome food.

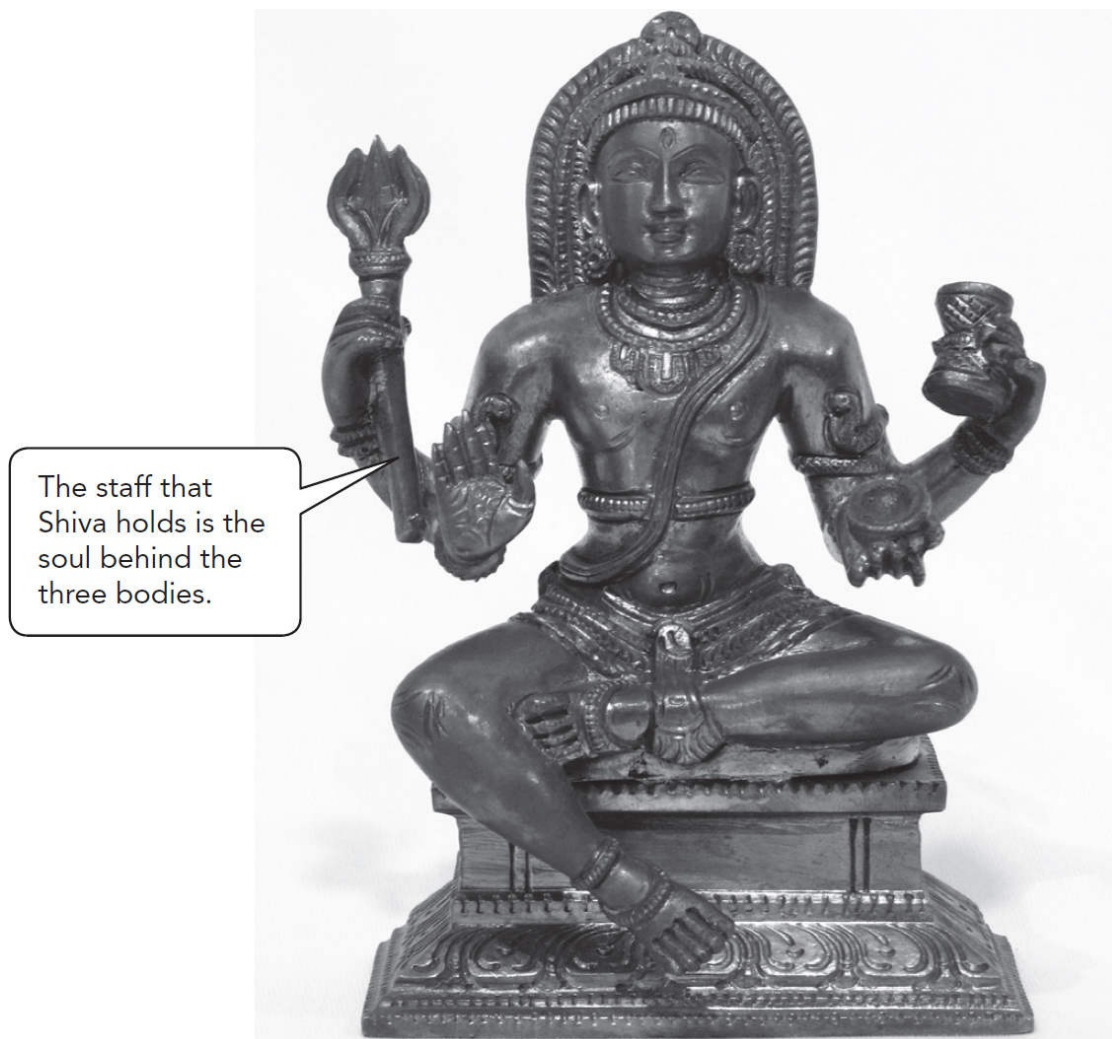


Calendar art of Shakti as Annapurna of Kashi offering Shiva food

As a reminder of the value of the Goddess and her kitchen, uncooked food in the form of nuts and raw milk is offered to the hermit Shiva of Kailasa while the householder Shankara of Kashi is offered cooked food.

HINDUS BELIEVE THAT WHEN A person dies, Yama claims his physical body, or sthula sharira, and his mental body, or sukshma sharira, which animates the physical body. But there is a third body — the body of subconscious memories, full of fears and resulting prejudices, known as karana sharira, which outlives death. This body envelops the Purusha and prevents it from observing the true nature of Prakriti, and hence realising its true self. That is why, when a person dies, the karana sharira travels across the river Vaitarni and reaches the land of the dead where it resides as a Pitr. As long as the karana sharira exists, fear still exists and the Pitr is not able to reach Shiva's Kailasa where there is bliss forever. In order to reach Shiva's abode, one has to purge the karana sharira of all fears and prejudices. This can only be done in the land of the living. For this, one needs a human body that offers the wherewithal to imagine and reflect and choose. To obtain the human body the Pitr have to be reborn. Once reborn, to sustain the flesh, they need food.



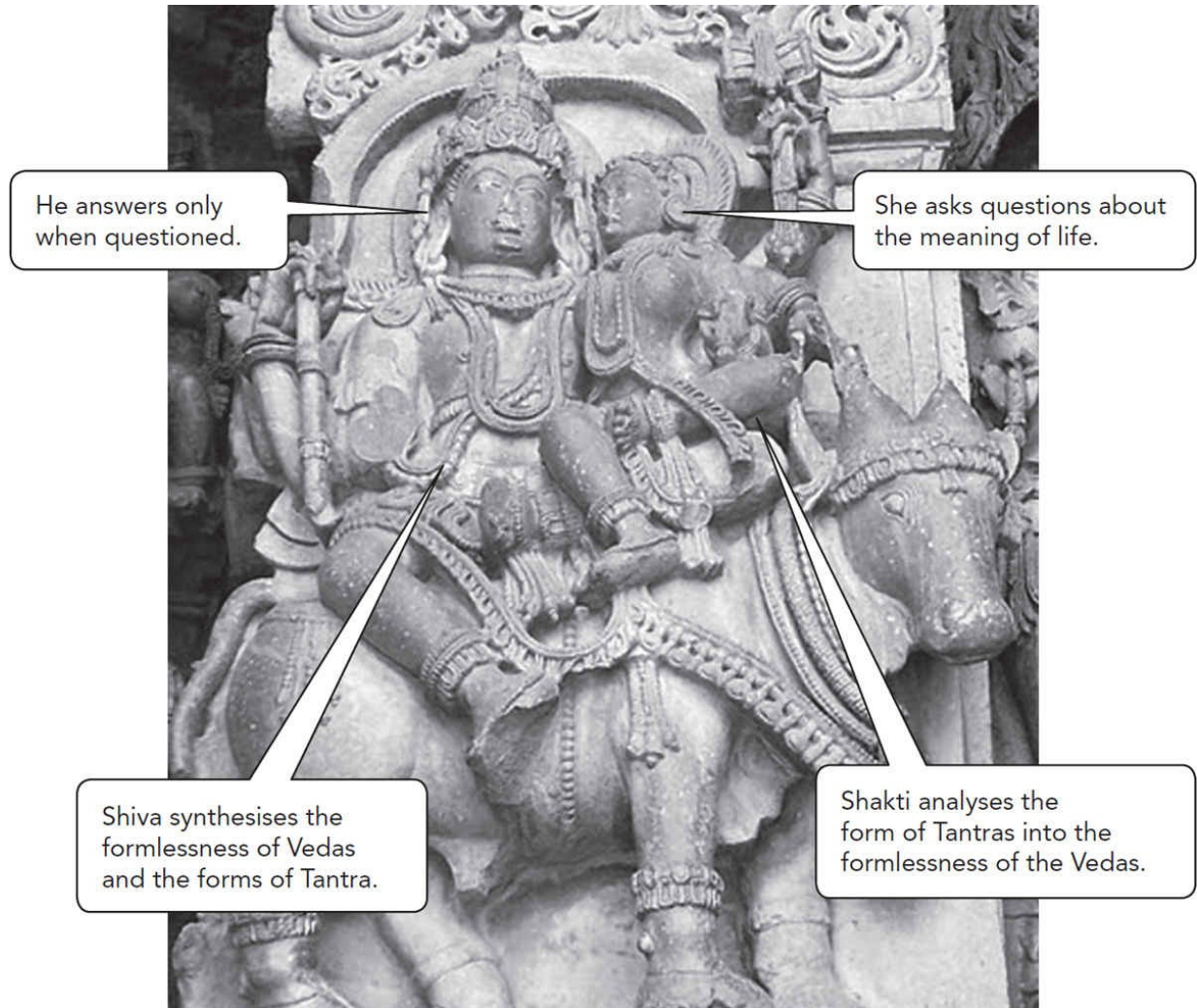


Bronze of Shiva holding the trident

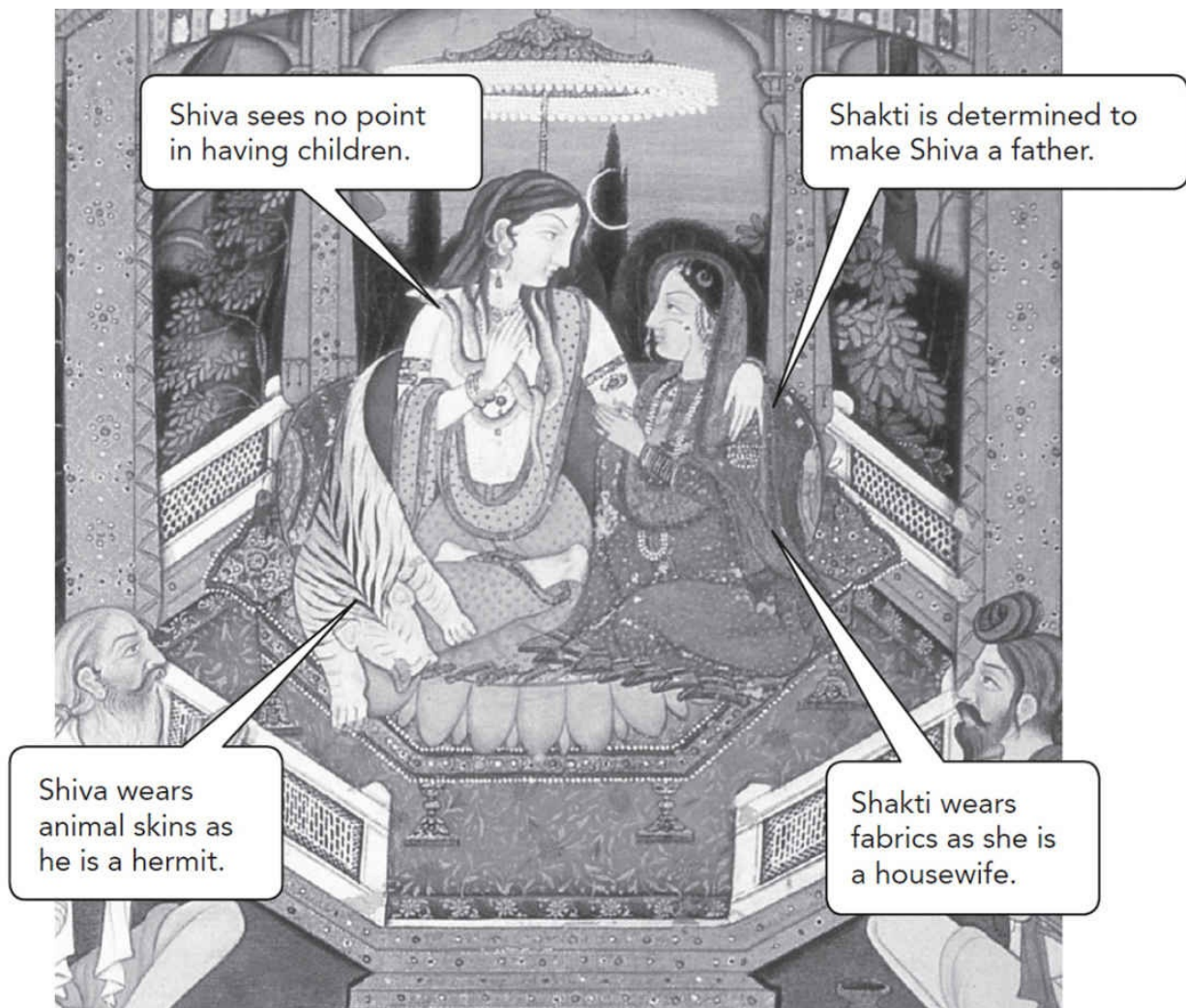
The scriptures state that every living creature is obligated to produce children to repay the debt they owe to their ancestors who gave them life. This is Pitr-rin. During funeral ceremonies, the Pitrs are offered balls of mashed rice. The balls represent the human body because ultimately food forms the building block of the flesh. By offering these balls to ancestors, the living assure the dead that they will produce children, enable the dead to regain sthula and sukshma sharira, and thus repay their debt.

The concept of debt is a cultural thought that forces the human male to produce children. This cultural thought is needed because, of all creatures on this planet, only human couples can choose whether to have children or not. In case of all other animals, procreation is fettered by natural rhythms, not free will. Even amongst humans, the male of the species has greater choice. The female of

the human species can be forced to conceive a child but the human male cannot be forced to make a woman pregnant. Even if aroused, he need not spill the seed in the womb. Thus he can take pleasure but not father a child. The concept of debt to ancestors or Pitr-rin is an integral part of culture aimed at preventing men from becoming indifferent, self-absorbed hermits and forcing them to become householders, responsible for others.



Temple wall image from Belur, Karnataka, showing Shiva and Shakti on a bull



North Indian miniature showing Shiva and Shakti atop Mount Kailasa

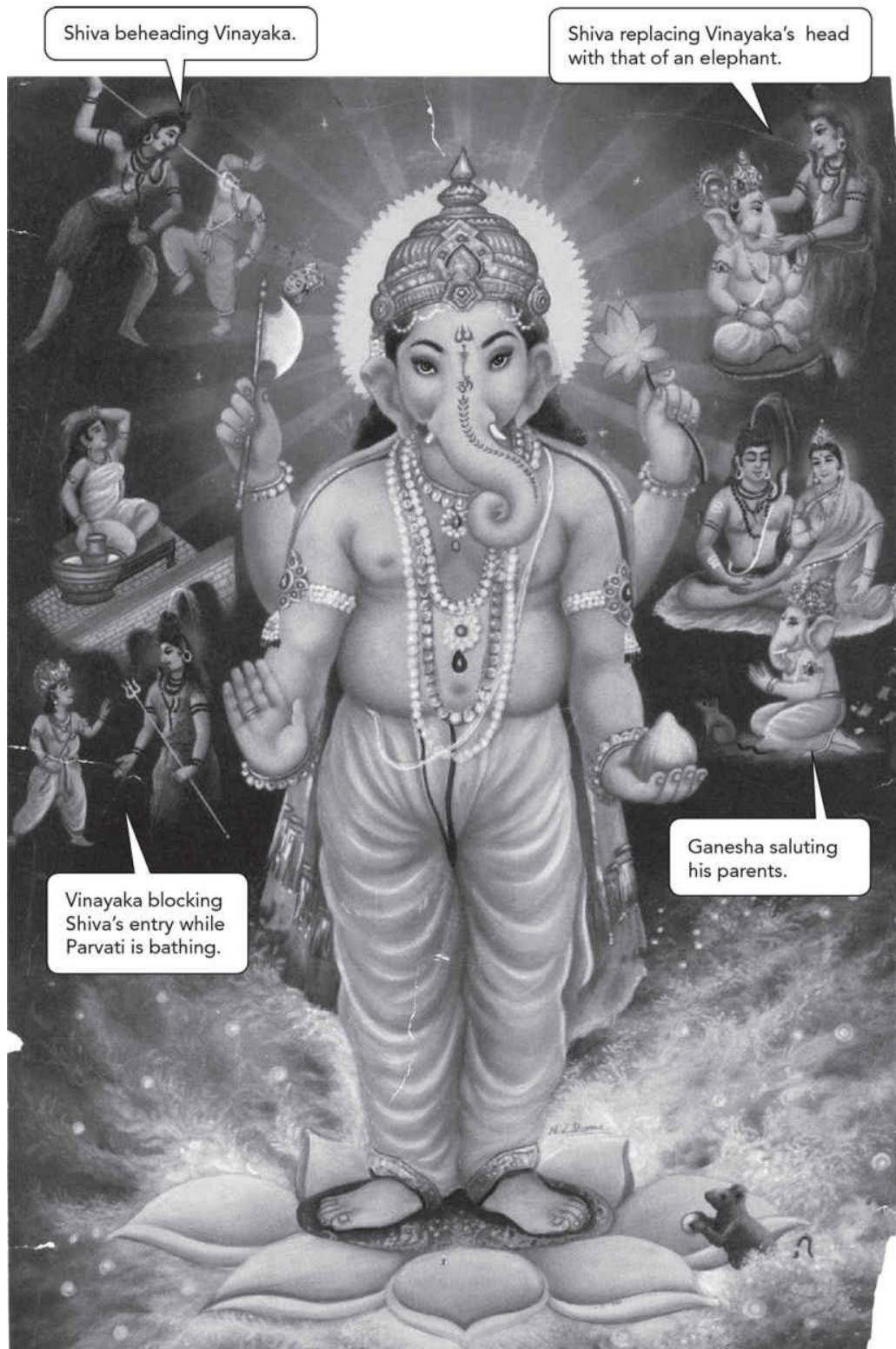
When Parvati expresses her desire to be a mother, Shankara argues, 'I owe no debt to any ancestors, as I have no ancestors; I was never born, and I will not die, so I need no children who will help me be reborn.' When Parvati persists, Shankara walks away from her to meditate in serene isolation in the dense daruka vana, the deodar forest.

Children here are a powerful metaphor for true involvement with the material world. Through marriage, the Goddess has managed to open the eye of Shiva. Shankara observes nature, but does not feel responsible for nature. The only way he will feel empathy for the world is when he creates something in it. A child is therefore necessary.

SINCE SHIVA REFUSES TO GIVE her a child, Parvati decides to create a child on her

own. She anoints her body with a paste of turmeric and oil, then scrapes it off, collects the rubbings which have mingled with her sweat, and moulds out of it a doll into which she breathes life. This is her son whom she calls Vinayaka, the one born without (vina) a man (nayaka). She tells her son to guard the gate of her house and not let anyone in.

Shiva, who had withdrawn from the Goddess following her repeated demands for a child, returns only to find his path to Kailasa blocked by a stranger. He asks the stranger to step aside. The stranger refuses. Shiva gets jealous as he wonders about the beautiful boy who blocks his path. He gets angry because the boy is strong enough to block his path. The boy reminds him of the territorial Brahma and Daksha. He decides to get rid of the obstacle that blocks his path to the Goddess.



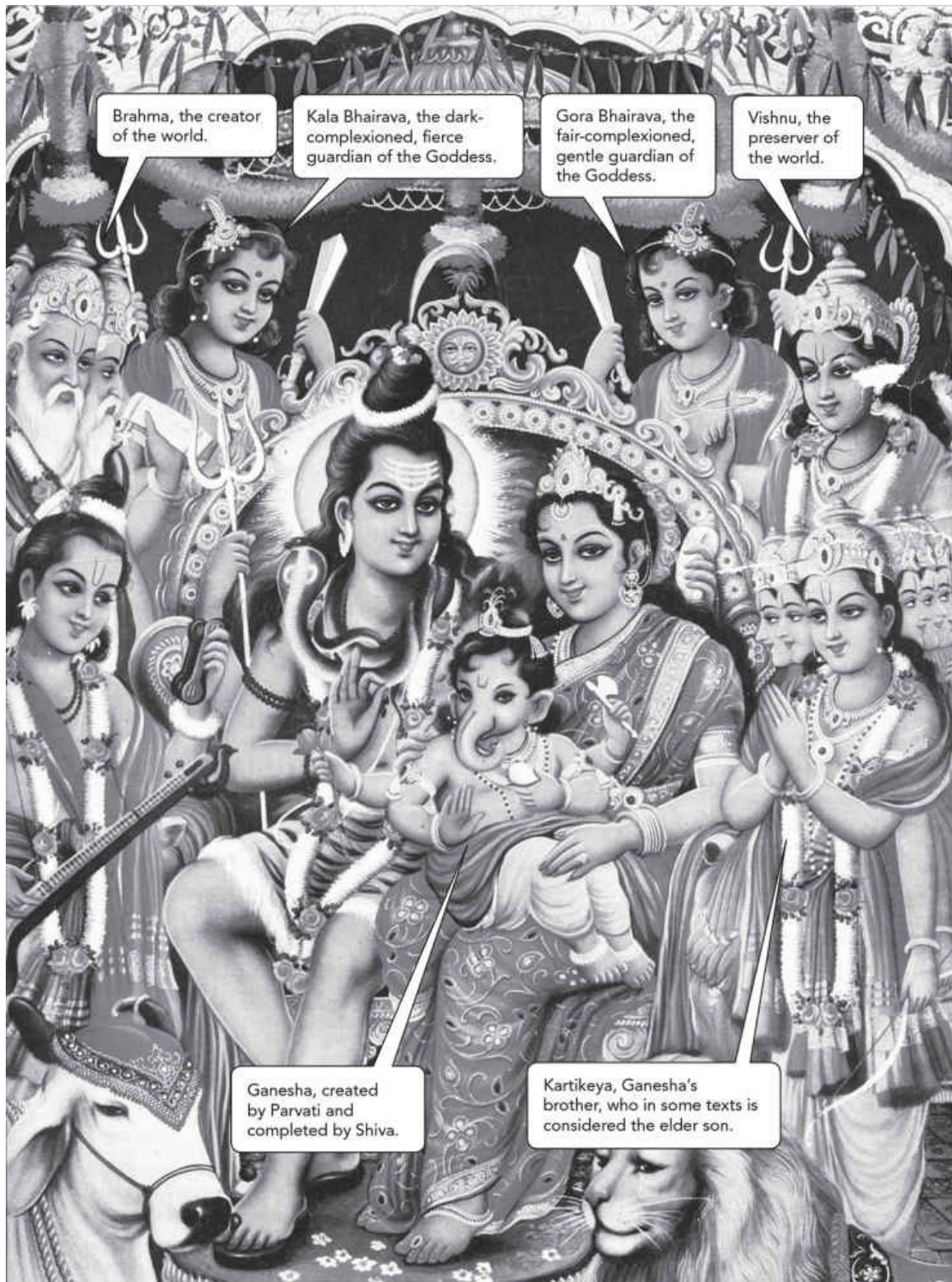
Calendar art showing the creation of Ganesha

So Shiva raises his trident and beheads the boy. The head of Vinayaka is destroyed. Shiva marches in triumphantly, covered with the boy's blood. When Parvati sees this, she screams and runs to the threshold of her house where she finds the headless body of her son. She wails and unties her hair and beats her chest in agony. 'My son, my son. You killed my son.' She transforms from the gentle demure Gauri into the dark and fearsome Kali. She becomes wild in her fury. Shiva trembles.

Shiva realises his insensitivity. In satisfying his own need for solitude, he did not consider Parvati's loneliness atop the snow-capped peaks of the Himalayas. He did not look at her; he did not do her darshan. Had he known her needs, he could have satisfied them or helped her outgrow them. But he did neither. Unless the self-contained engage with the needy, the needy will never learn how to become self-contained. Parvati's temper, her transformation from Gauri to Kali, served as a darpan or mirror, reflecting Shiva's indifference. What use is imagination, if it simply ignores and invalidates the other?

Vinayaka does not recognise Shiva. Shiva does not like this. The Goddess thus turns the table on Shiva through Vinayaka. All this time, Shiva had shut his eyes to Shakti. Through Vinayaka, Shakti shuts her eyes to Shiva. When humanity ignores imagination, there is no growth, no quest to outgrow fear, no desire for spiritual reality. Evolution does not happen. Spiritual reality remains undiscovered. Only the self matters; others remain invisible. In other words, humans stay animals.

Realising the value of Prakriti and of the head that has been destroyed, a considerate and caring Shankara decides to resurrect the boy. He orders his Ganas to fetch him the head of the first creature they encounter in the northern direction. The Ganas find an elephant. The *Brahmavaivarta Purana* says this elephant was Airavat, the mount of Indra. Others say it was one of the elephants that flanks Lakshmi. The head is placed on the severed neck of Vinayaka and he is brought back to life.



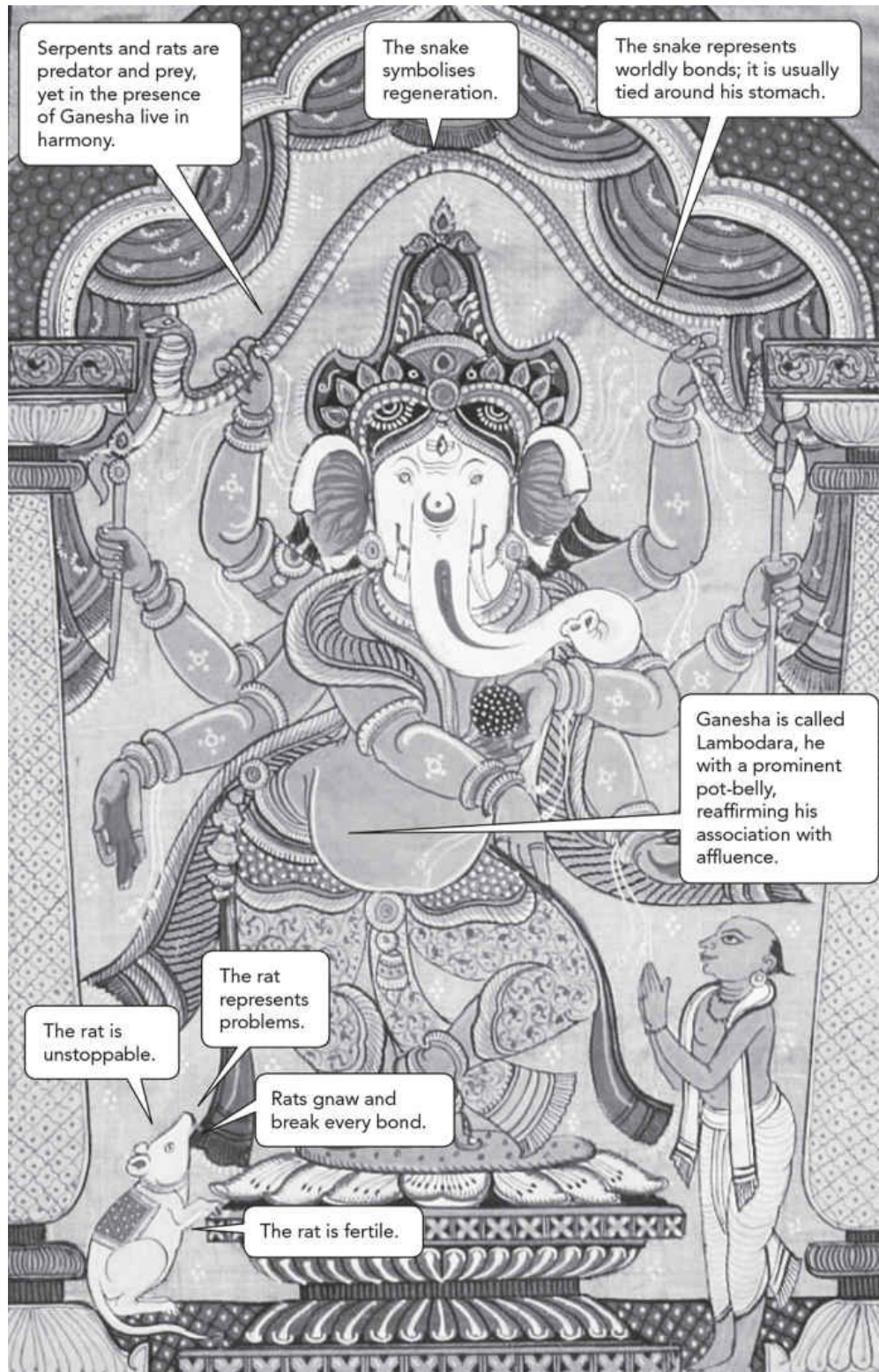
Calendar art showing Shiva and Parvati with their son, Ganesha

Shiva declares him to be his son and names him Ganesha, first amongst Ganas, and Ganapati, master of the Ganas. Until this moment, the Ganas followed Shiva, but Shiva was indifferent to their presence. But now, thanks to his tryst with Parvati and Vinayaka, he looks at the Ganas, becomes sensitive to them, understands their inadequacies, includes them in his vision, and provides them with a leader, his own son. Ganapati thus embodies Shiva's empathy for the trials and tribulations of humanity.

MOST SCHOLARS AGREE THAT THE cult of Ganesha had an independent origin and that it merged with the cult of Shiva later in history. In early Vedic scriptures, there are references to multiple malevolent beings called Vinayakas, some of whom have elephant heads. In later Puranic scriptures, there is one gentle, elephant-headed being who becomes the child of Shiva and Shakti.

There are many stories of Ganesha's birth besides the one in which Shiva beheads Vinayaka. In one story, Ganesha is born when Shiva and Shakti make love taking the form of elephants. In another, Shiva creates a child of his own image for the pleasure of Shakti but since he looks too much like the father, Shakti replaces his head with that of an elephant.

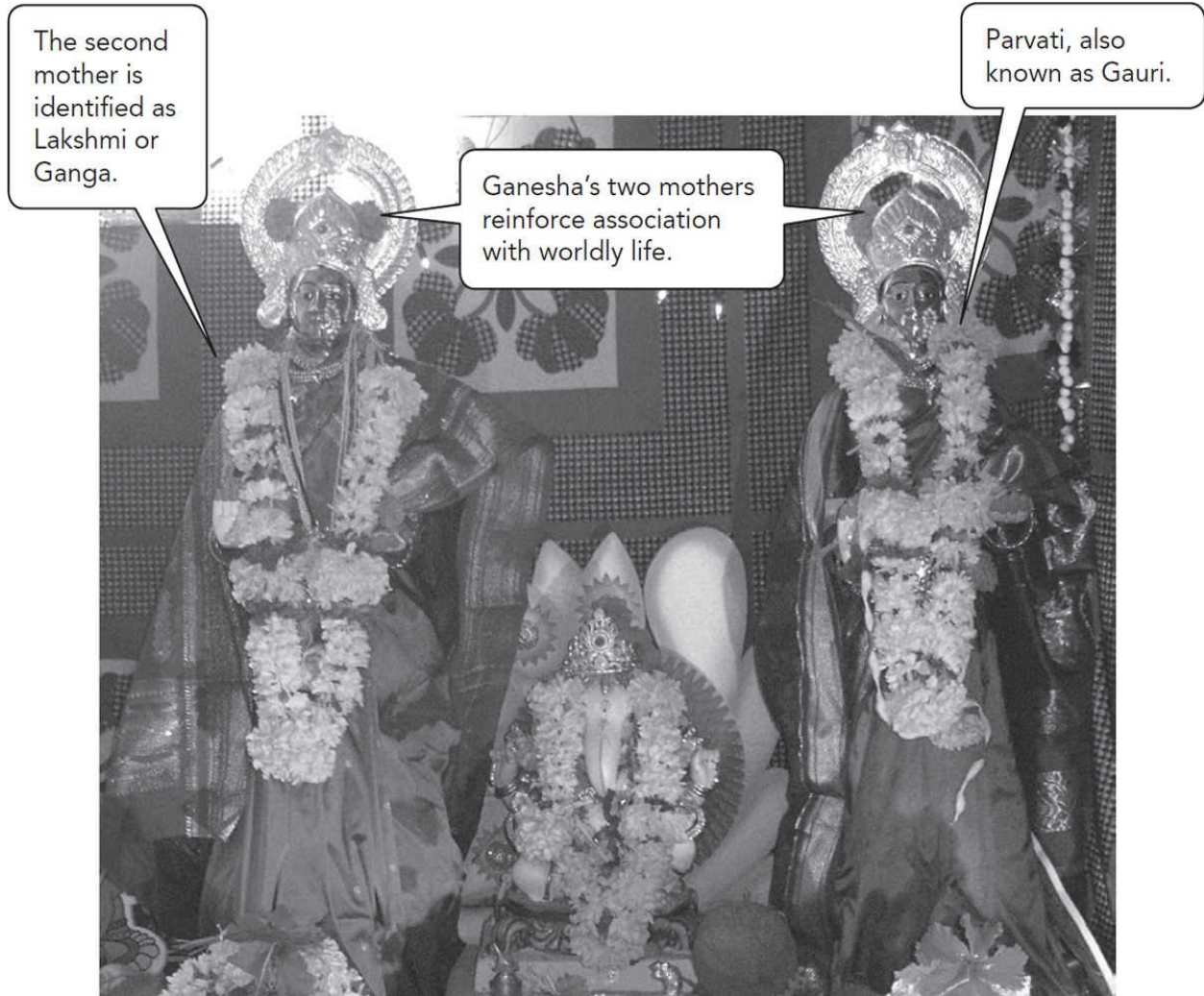
In Maharashtra, the cult of Ganesha was the most popular, especially under the patronage of Maratha kings. Scriptures such as *Ganesha Purana* and *Ganesha Upanishad* were written in the 18th century in adoration of Ganesha, describing him as self-created. He is associated with the earth's fertility as well as the arts and wisdom. He is also described as a warrior who kills demons. One of the demons he killed was resurrected and turned into a rat or Mooshika, which is Ganesha's vehicle.



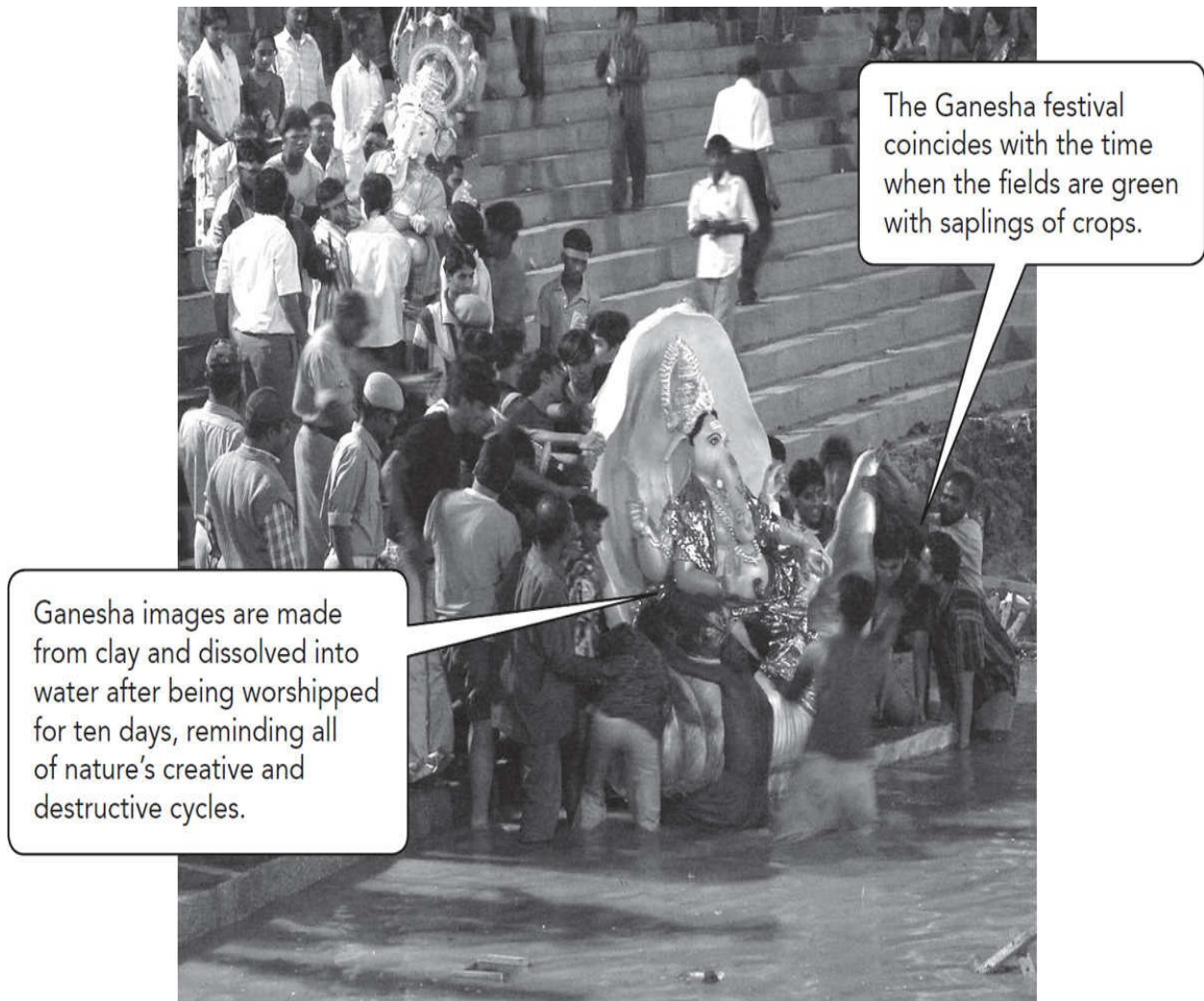
Patta painting of Ganesha from Orissa

THOUGH THE SON OF A hermit, Ganesha's corpulent belly indicates great affluence. He is surrounded by abundance. He is often worshipped with Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. He is associated with several fertility symbols such as rats, serpents and blades of grass. The population of rats rises rapidly soon after its numbers have been exterminated, indicating their fertility. Serpents also slough old skin for new, and are thus able to regenerate themselves. Grass grows back as soon as it is plucked. Regeneration is critical to survival. Regeneration compensates for losses incurred by death. A shepherd who loses sheep to a wolf depends on the ability of the other sheep to reproduce to make good his numbers. A farmer who has harvested the crop depends on the regeneration of earth's fertility to ensure he does not starve the next season. Ganesha's association with fertility symbols is an acknowledgment of the cycle of life that sustains material reality. In the material world, everything dies and is reborn. Rats, serpents and grass are very visible and potent symbols of this principle.

In rituals, Ganesha is often worshipped with two mothers. They are identified as the elder mother and the younger mother. In Goddess tradition, Shakti is often worshipped with a female companion, her sakhi, who is identified as her sister or her servant. Some identify the younger mother as Lakshmi, and others as Ganga. The identification of two women as mothers draws attention to the greater role played by the Goddess in the creation of Ganesha. She initiates his creation; Shiva completes it. Ganesha draws attention towards the value of nature, of food and of worldly life.



Photograph showing Ganesha being worshipped with his two mothers



Photograph showing Ganesha being immersed in water

Ganesha is worshipped twice a year, before the spring and autumn harvest. The more popular of the two Ganesha festivals is the one that takes place after the rains, in autumn, when the earth is green. Ganesha is worshiped with his mother, Gauri. She is the earth and he is the vegetation born of her that sustains life on earth. Both festivals of Ganesha involve making of clay statues of Ganesha. These are worshipped with blades of grass for ten days and then immersed in water. Ganesha's image thus comes and goes in a cyclical way, a reminder of nature's cycles, of the seasons of sowing and harvest, of life and death.

IN MANY PARTS OF INDIA, Ganesha is considered a bachelor god. They say he did not marry as no woman was as good as his mother. So he stands in the shade of

the banana tree who is his mother. There is another story for Ganesha's association with the banana tree. No one wanted to marry a man with the head of an elephant. So, his mother draped a sari around a banana plant and gave it to Ganesha as his wife. This is the reason a banana plant with a sari is found next to Ganesha during Durga Puja, celebrated in autumn. She is called Kola-Bau, the matriarch of the clan.

The banana plant is a valuable source of nutrition, demanding hardly any maintenance, constantly regenerating itself to provide more fruit. The pith of the banana plant is also edible. And the leaves of the banana plant serve as disposable dishes on which food is served. The banana is thus the Goddess taking care of food so that Ganesha can focus on wisdom. Ganesha therefore serves as a scribe to help the sage Vyasa write down the epic, the *Mahabharata*. This story captures the essence of life's truth, balancing Shakti's kitchen and Shiva's meditation.

A banana plant, draped in a sari, is placed next to Ganesha, representing (opinions vary) either his mother or his wife.

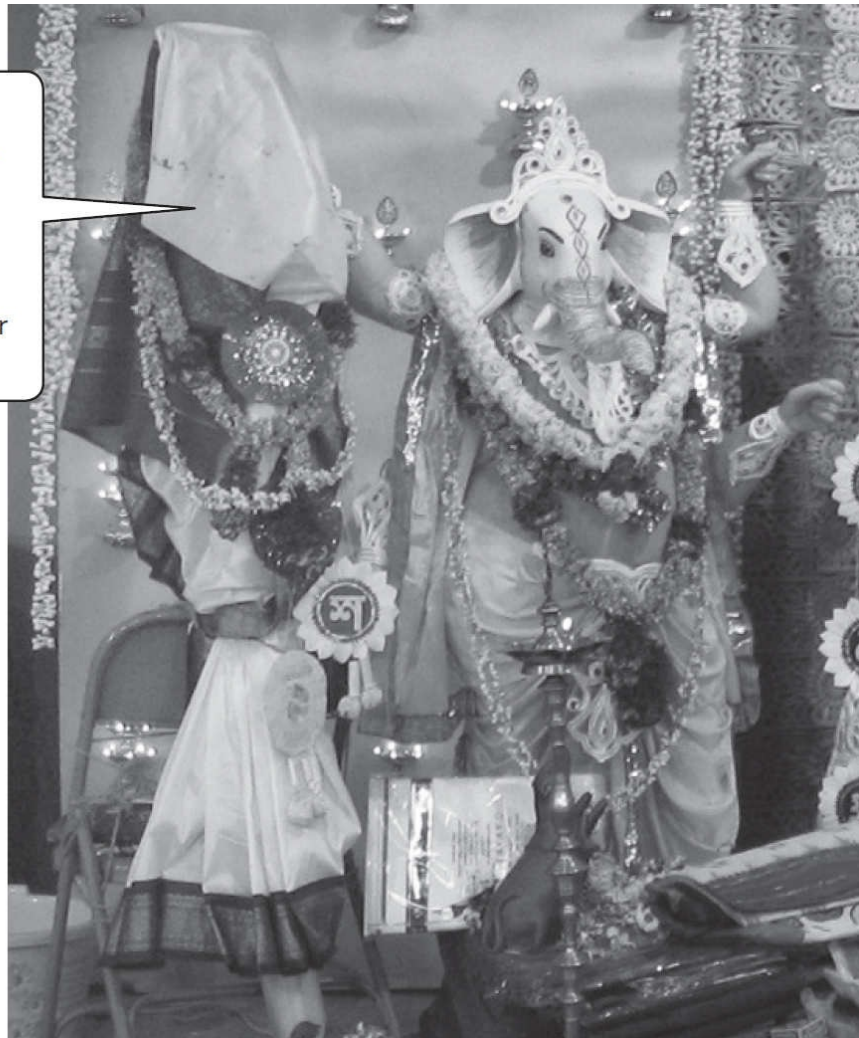


Image of Kola-Bau and Ganesha from a Durga pandal in Bengal

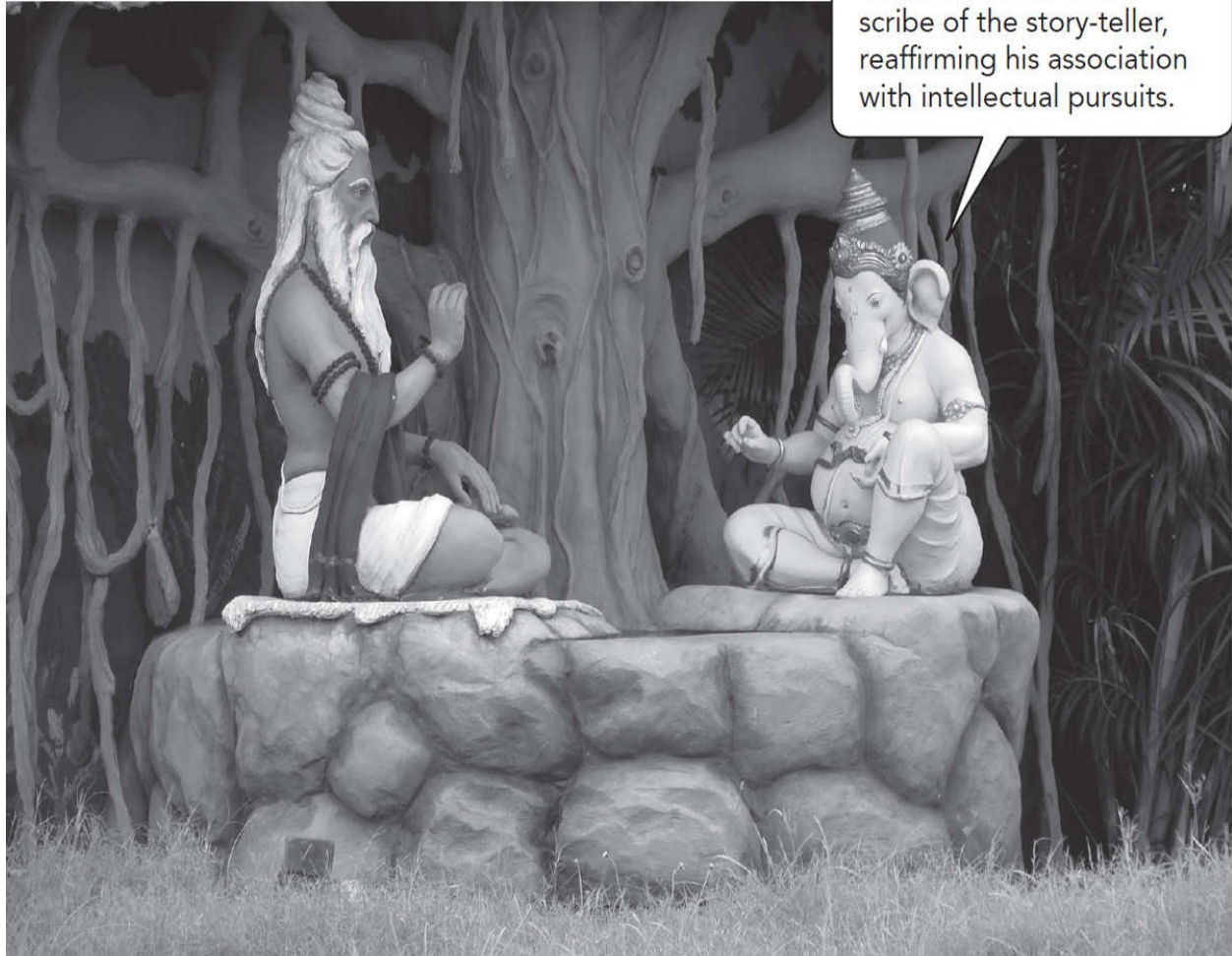
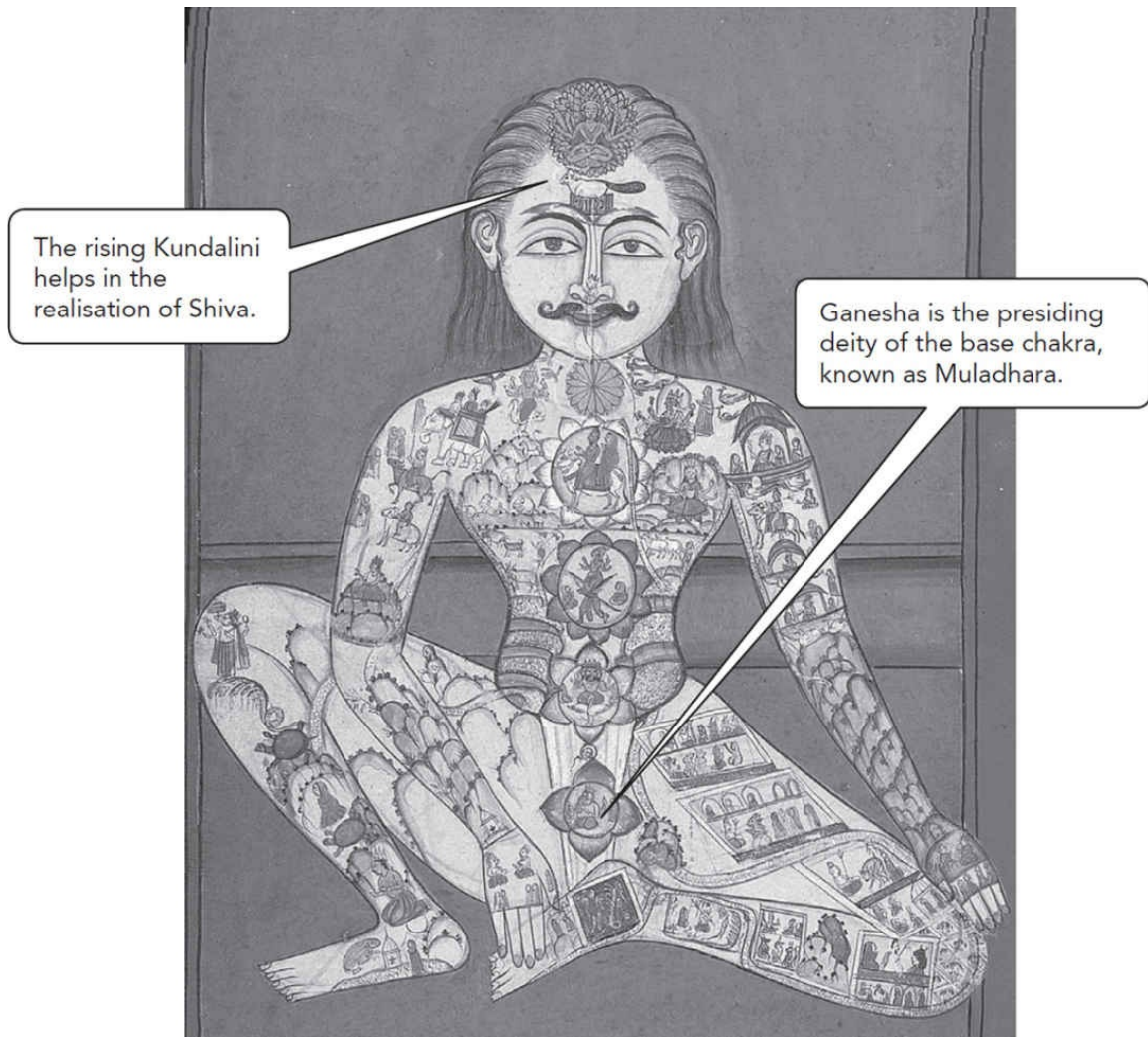


Image of Vyasa and Ganesha

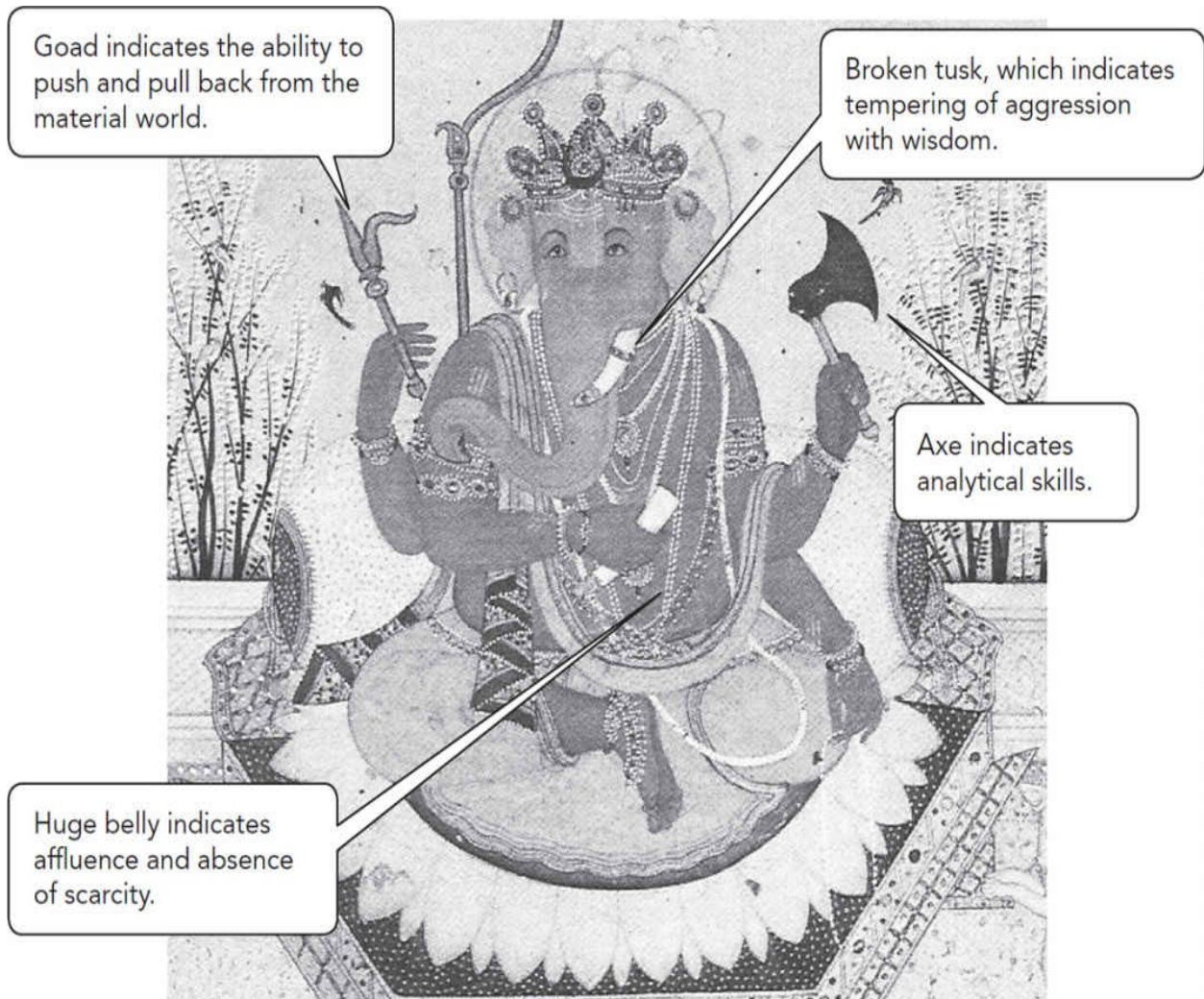
Ganesha broke one of his two tusks to use as a stylus with which he could write the epic that Vyasa narrated. In another story, he broke the tusk to strike the moon when it made fun of his huge size. In still another story, this tusk is broken when he is fighting either Parashurama or Balarama, both forms of Vishnu. By breaking one of the tusks, Ganesha's masculinity is toned down. Though son of Shiva and Shakti, he is closer to his mother, hence nature, and worldly life.

In folklore, tusks are associated with pretension: elephants show one set of teeth while they eat with another set of teeth. By breaking off one of the tusks, Ganesha is breaking pretension. The tusks are symbols of aggressive power. Ganesha is breaking it so that strength is used only to defend and nourish, not dominate and exploit.

Ganesha's association with wisdom is endorsed by his association with the Muladhara Chakra in Tantra. Tantra is the technology for the finite Brahma to reach the infinite Shiva with the help of Shakti. This is visualised as the rise of a serpent, Kundalini, representing our wisdom. Tantra visualises this serpent as resting at the base of the spine and rising up through the spine to the brain. As the serpent rises, lotus flowers bloom in the form of chakras. The final chakra to bloom is the thousand-petalled lotus on top of the head. The first chakra that blooms is the Muladhara Chakra located at the base of the spine near the anus. It marks the most basic instinct of man — the craving for food stemming from our fear of scarcity, and hence, death. Unless one outgrows this fear, the rise of the Kundalini and the journey to realisation of Shiva will not even begin. Only when Ganesha is realised will the journey begin.



Seven chakras of Tantra

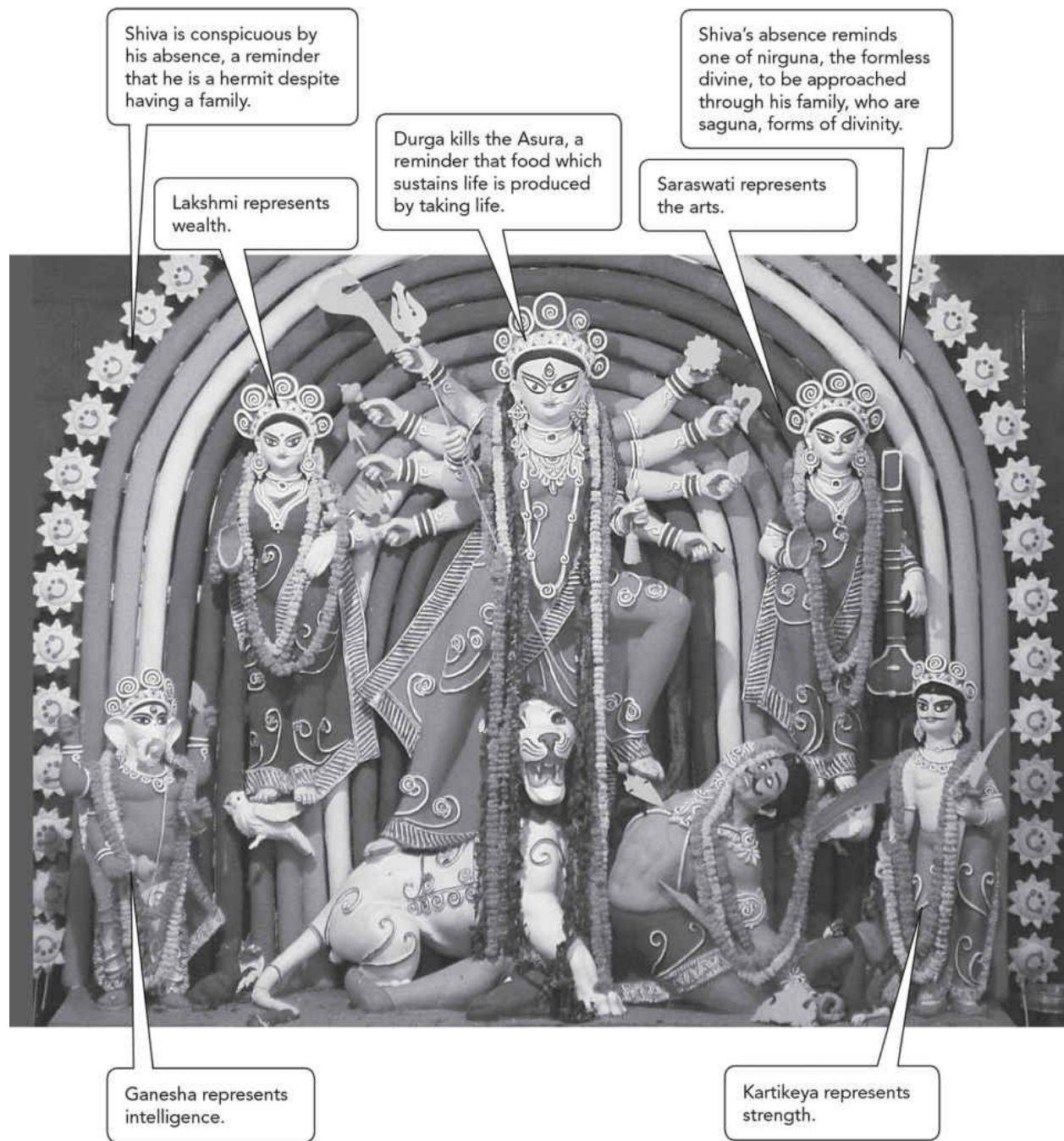


North Indian miniature of Ganesha

Ganesha's wisdom manifests as the two symbols he carries in his hand. In one hand, he holds an axe and in the other hand he holds a noose. The axe represents analytical skills that enable one to separate objective from subjective reality, thought and form, animal instincts from human conditionings, sense of self from the sense of other, me from mine. The noose represents the ability to outgrow these divides, to unite the opposites, synthesise solutions, to recognise that ultimately, in nirguna brahman, Shiva and Shakti are not separate but one.

In some images, Ganesha holds a sugar cane in one hand and the elephant goad or ankush in the other. Sugar cane represents Kama, the god of desire and freedom. The elephant goad represents Yama, the god of death and bondage. Ganesha thus acknowledges the life-giving aspect of nature as well as the life-taking aspect of nature.

THE LORE OF SHIVA CONSTANTLY refers to beheadings by Shiva. Shiva beheads Brahma. Shiva beheads Daksha. Shiva beheads Vinayaka. Each time the beheading is prompted by territorial behaviour resulting from amplified fear. But in Vinayaka's case, Shiva makes an error. Vinayaka is not being territorial. He is ignorant. He does not know about Shiva, because Shiva has not contributed to his birth. Shiva is thus responsible for creating Vinayaka who ends up becoming his own obstacle. A restless Goddess may dance to arouse Shiva but Shiva also has to dance to calm the Goddess. It is not a one-way street. It is in the human imagination that Purusha and Prakriti can move towards each other and finally meet. Ganesha embodies that possibility.

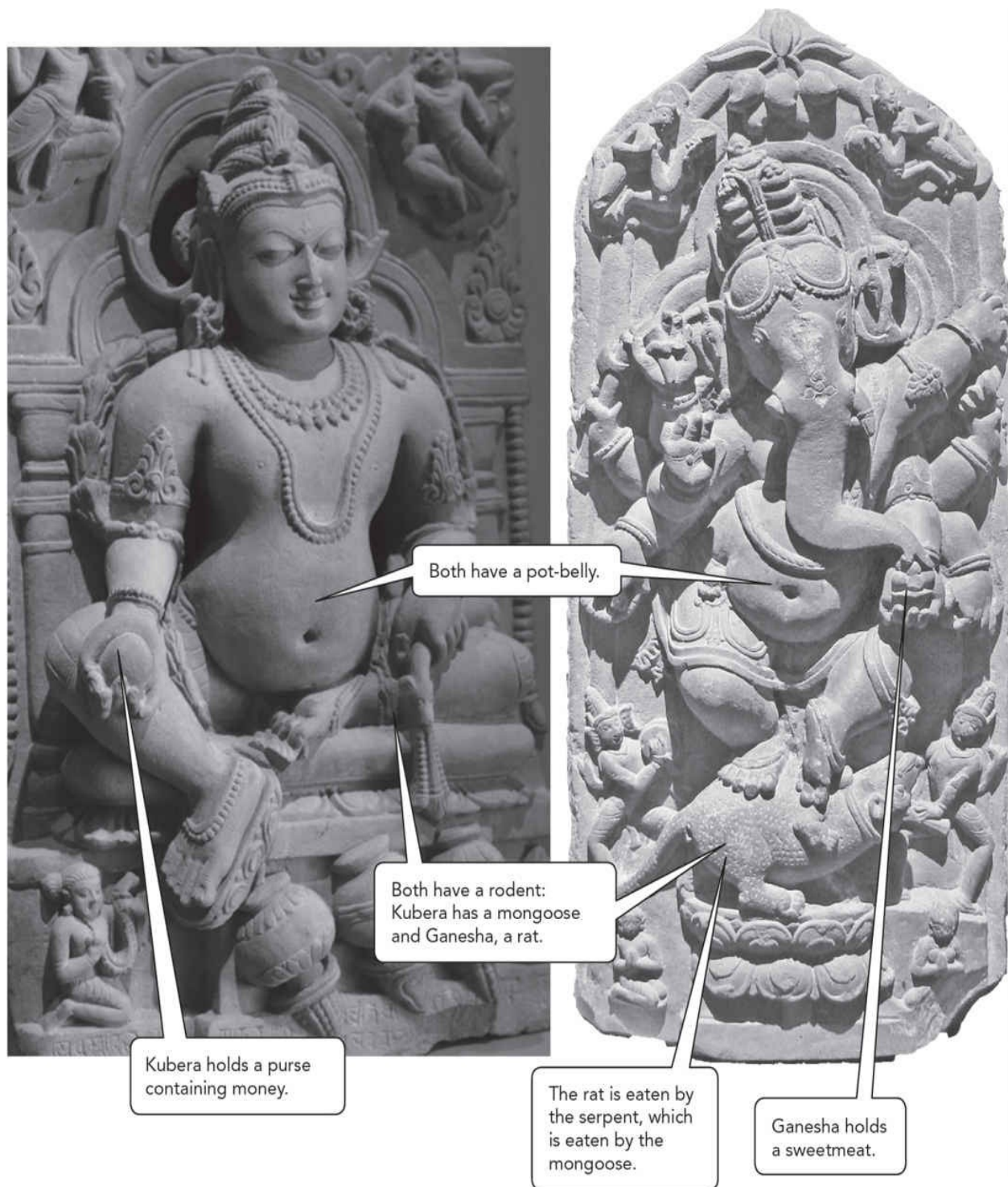


Bengali image of Parvati as Durga and her children

The Goddess can provide food to allay hunger. But Shiva has to give meaning to both food and hunger. Humans are the only creatures on earth that

can reflect on life. Humans wonder what is the purpose of life, why do we live, why do we eat. Nature offers no answer. Humans are able to domesticate the earth, establish fields and orchards and gardens and grow abundant food. Surrounded by great wealth, only humans wonder why do they have such power over nature. Humans can build great walls and establish rules and make themselves secure. But the heaviest of security does not take away death. Humans feel invalidated, weak and helpless, and wonder what is the point of human life. When no answer is forthcoming, a frightened man starts hoarding things, not just to secure his future, but to create the delusion of immortality. Our wealth and family, our possessions become an extension of our bodies. It is the fourth body — property that outlives the death of the other three. We hoard more and more property and thereby give ourselves meaning.

Yakshas are hoarders. They are visualised as enormously fat creatures who hoard wealth. They are closely associated with another race, also described as Rakshasas. Both share a common grandfather, Pulatsya, son of Brahma. It was Kubera, the leader of Yakshas, who built the golden city of Lanka. Ravana, leader of Rakshasas, became jealous of Kubera. He drove Kubera out of Lanka and usurped the kingdom of Yakshas. Yakshas are thus creatures who have lost their home. No one gives them refuge, as everyone hates them. Everyone wants their treasures, not them. Abandoned and excluded by everyone they find refuge with Shiva. They become his Ganas.



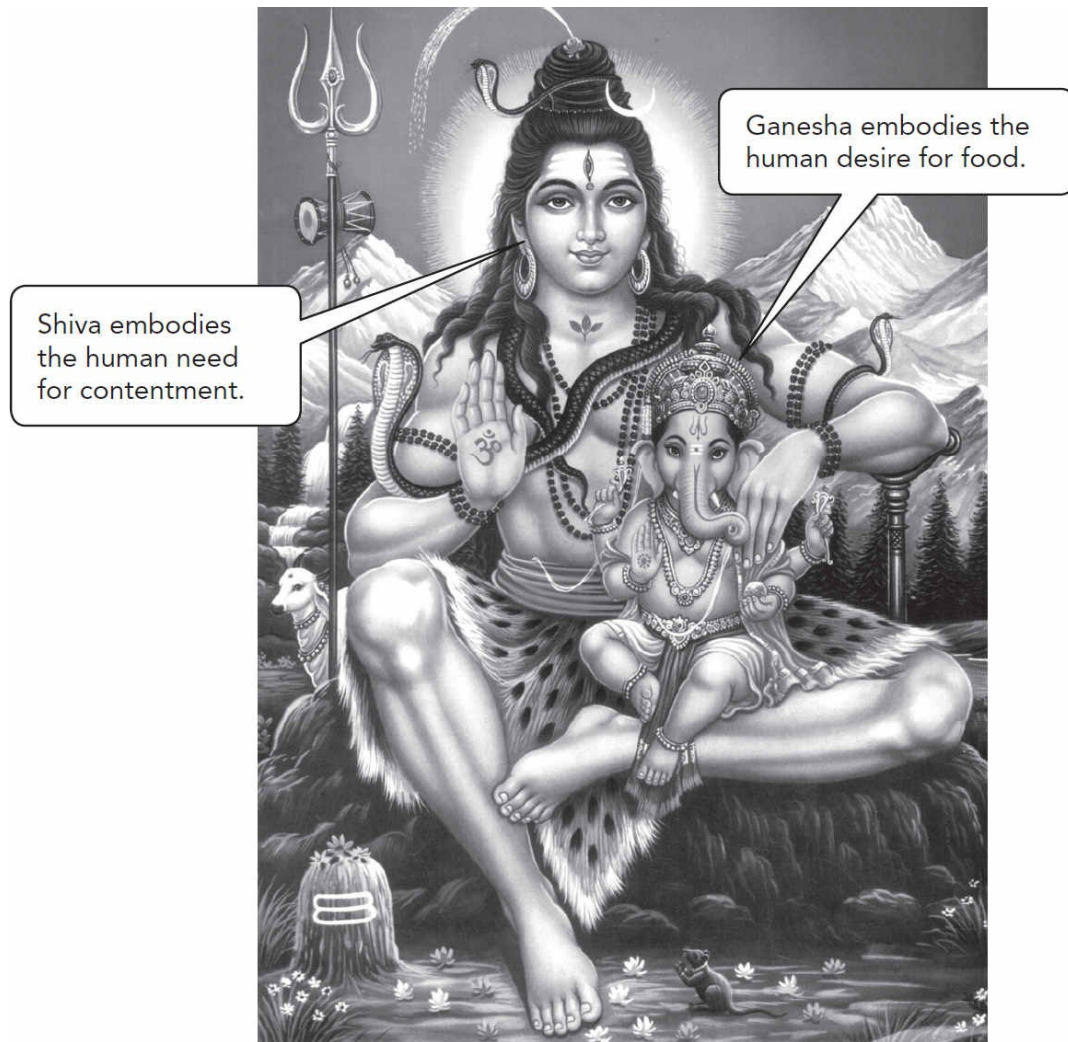
Stone images of Kubera and Ganesha

Kubera keeps talking about all his wealth. So Parvati, who sits on Shiva's lap, reaches out, plucks out his left eye and eats it. Kubera howls in agony.

‘Surely you can replace that eye with all your wealth,’ says the Goddess. Kubera realises he cannot. He becomes aware of his mortality. He realises how wealth cannot compensate for his fear of death. Wealth cannot give meaning to existence. To remind himself of this, he replaces his lost eye with an eye of gold, which is why Kubera is called Pingalaksha, he with a golden eye. Shiva makes him the guardian of the northern direction, so that he will guide people towards wisdom.

Once, Kubera felt sorry for Ganesha. ‘Let me feed you,’ said Kubera, ‘as clearly your father cannot afford to do so. You clearly look like someone who enjoys food.’ Ganesha accepted Kubera’s invitation, went to his house, and ate all that was offered. ‘I am still hungry,’ said the elephant-headed god. Kubera had to procure more food using the money in his treasury. Ganesha ate all that was served and kept asking for more. Finally Kubera fell at his feet and begged him to stop eating. ‘You are draining my treasury dry,’ he cried. Ganesha then said with a smile, ‘You seek food to conquer hunger and end up hoarding food. My father shows how to outgrow hunger, and hence is happy even in the absence of food.’

Kubera and Ganesha are very similar to each other, yet very different. Kubera is a Gana but Ganesha is their leader. Kubera is Shiva’s follower but Ganesha is Shiva’s son. Kubera holds a moneybag in his hand while Ganesha holds a moneybag-shaped sweetmeat called modaka in his hand. All living creatures need food to survive; humans hoard food to allay imaginary fears of future starvation. From this desire to hoard comes the notion of wealth and the craving for property and gold. Kubera indulges this hunger of man. Ganesha focuses on what really matters — food!



Poster art of Ganesha with his father

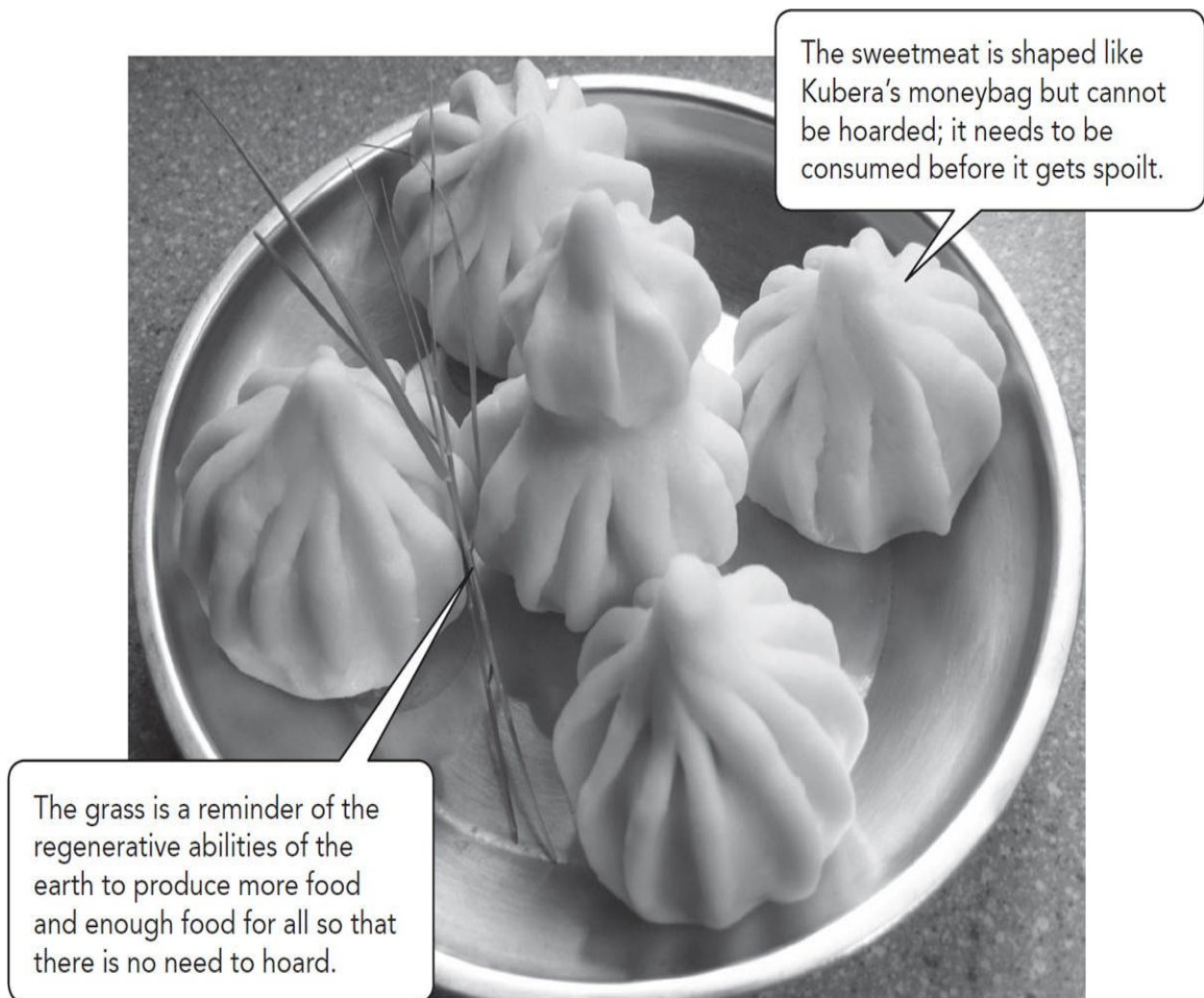


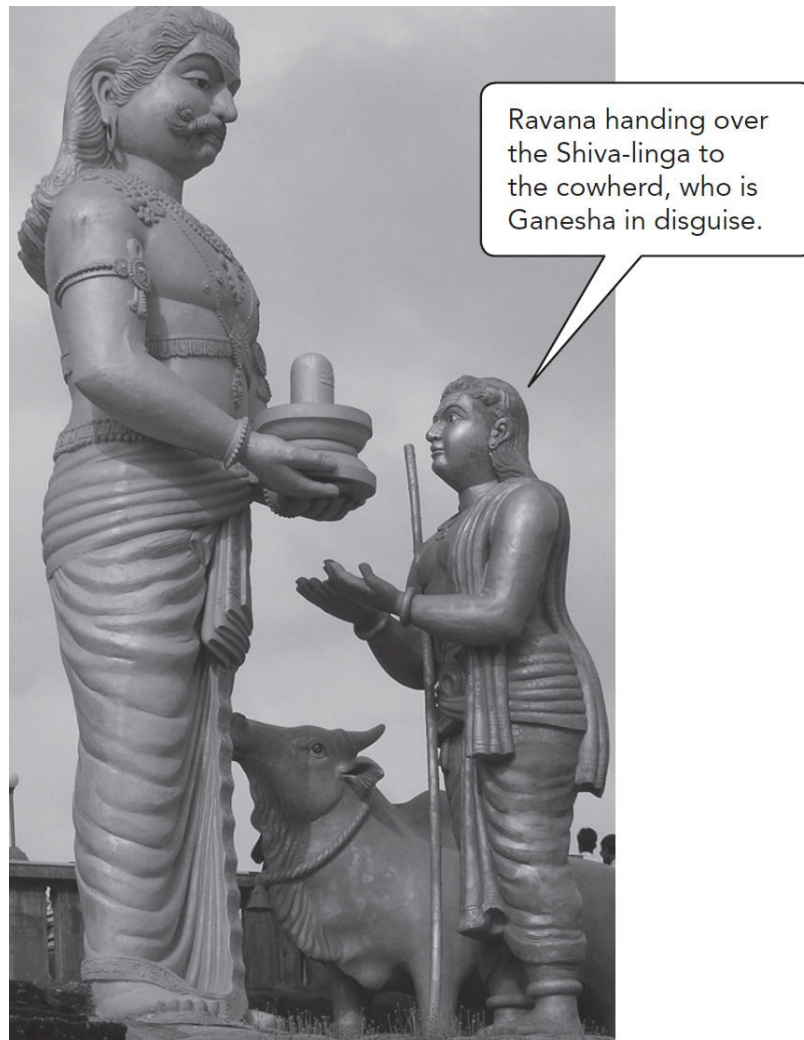
Image of the sweetmeat modaka with dhurva grass

In nature, rats eat grain, snakes eat rats and mongooses eat snakes. Thus the mongoose is on top of the food chain. Kubera has the mongoose as his pet. Ganesha has the serpent around his belly and the rat at his feet. The predator and the prey are thus in harmony. This represents the idea of heaven — a perfect world without fear. Kubera thus seeks a world where he is the dominant overlord, while Ganesha symbolises a world where there is no need for a pecking order.

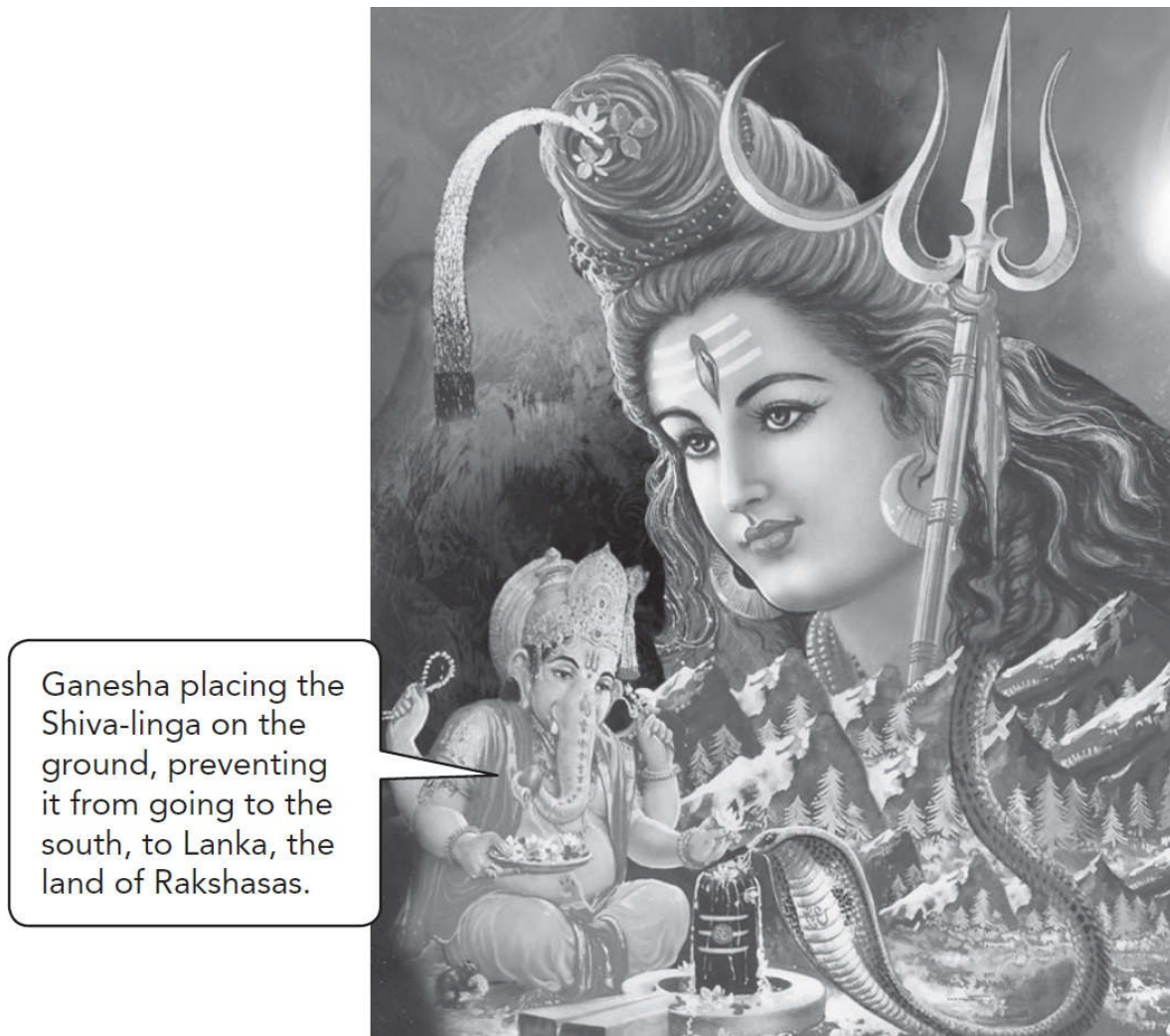
Kubera, the Gana, is trapped in the fear of scarcity and predation despite having wealth. That is why he hoards treasures but loses it all to the Rakshasas. Shiva makes Ganesha the leader of Ganas to help outgrow all fears. Only when fear is outgrown will the habit of hoarding be overcome. Only then will the Yakshas who came to Kailasa from Lanka truly discover the north, the land of

the Pole Star, which represents a state of mind where there is no dependence on nature, no fear of death, no fear of scarcity or predation, only bliss.

THE RAKSHASAS, LIKE THE YAKSHAS, are consumed by fear. That is why Ravana grabs what the Yakshas create. But that is not enough for Ravana. When he learns Kubera has now earned the affections of Shiva, he starts craving for Shiva's affection. But rather than moving north towards Shiva, he seeks to bring Shiva south.



Statue of Ravana and the cowherd



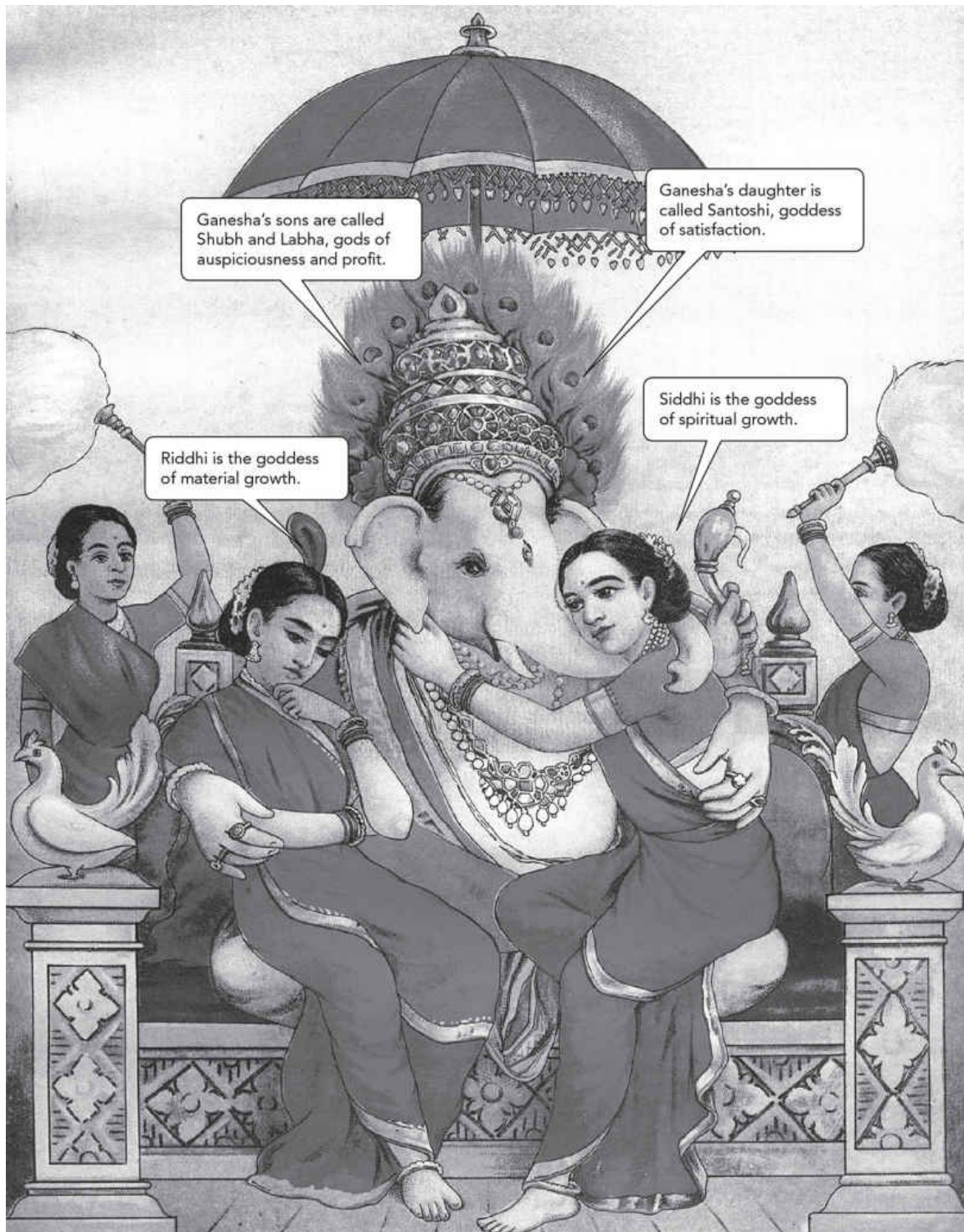
Poster art of Ganesha and Shiva

Shiva gives Ravana a Shiva-linga instructing him not to place it on the ground before he reaches Lanka. The gods know that once the Shiva-linga reaches Lanka, the Rakshasa-king will never share him with the world. They beg Ganesha to stop Ravana. So Ganesha causes Ravana to experience an intense desire to answer the call of nature. He then takes the form of a boy and offers to hold the Shiva-linga while Ravana relieves himself. As soon as Ravana gives Ganesha the Shiva-linga and turns his back, Ganesha places the Shiva-linga on the ground. There it stands steadfast. No matter how much Ravana tries, it remains rooted to the spot. This Shiva-linga that Ganesha prevented from reaching Lanka is located at Gokarna along the Konkan coast. Ganesha thus prevents the hoarding of Shiva by the Rakshasa-king.

In a similar story, Ravana's brother Vibhishana tries to take the image of

Vishnu to Lanka. Once again, Ganesha foils this plan by placing the image of Vishnu on the ground while Vibhishana is performing his ablutions. This image of Vishnu known as Ranganatha is found on the banks of the river Kaveri. Ganesha is thus the obstacle to the hoarding of all things.

Ravana and Vibhishana look at divinity as commodities to be hoarded, which is why they seek to take Shiva and Vishnu to the south. They want divinity all for themselves. Like the hoarding Yakshas, they are not concerned about the other. This self-absorption is the consequence of fear. They want to secure themselves at the cost of the other. They are still pashu despite being surrounded by immense wealth and despite being in the presence of Shiva. Ganesha therefore stops their journey south and forces them to look north, towards his father, towards wisdom.



Calendar art showing Ganesha with his two wives, Riddhi and Siddhi

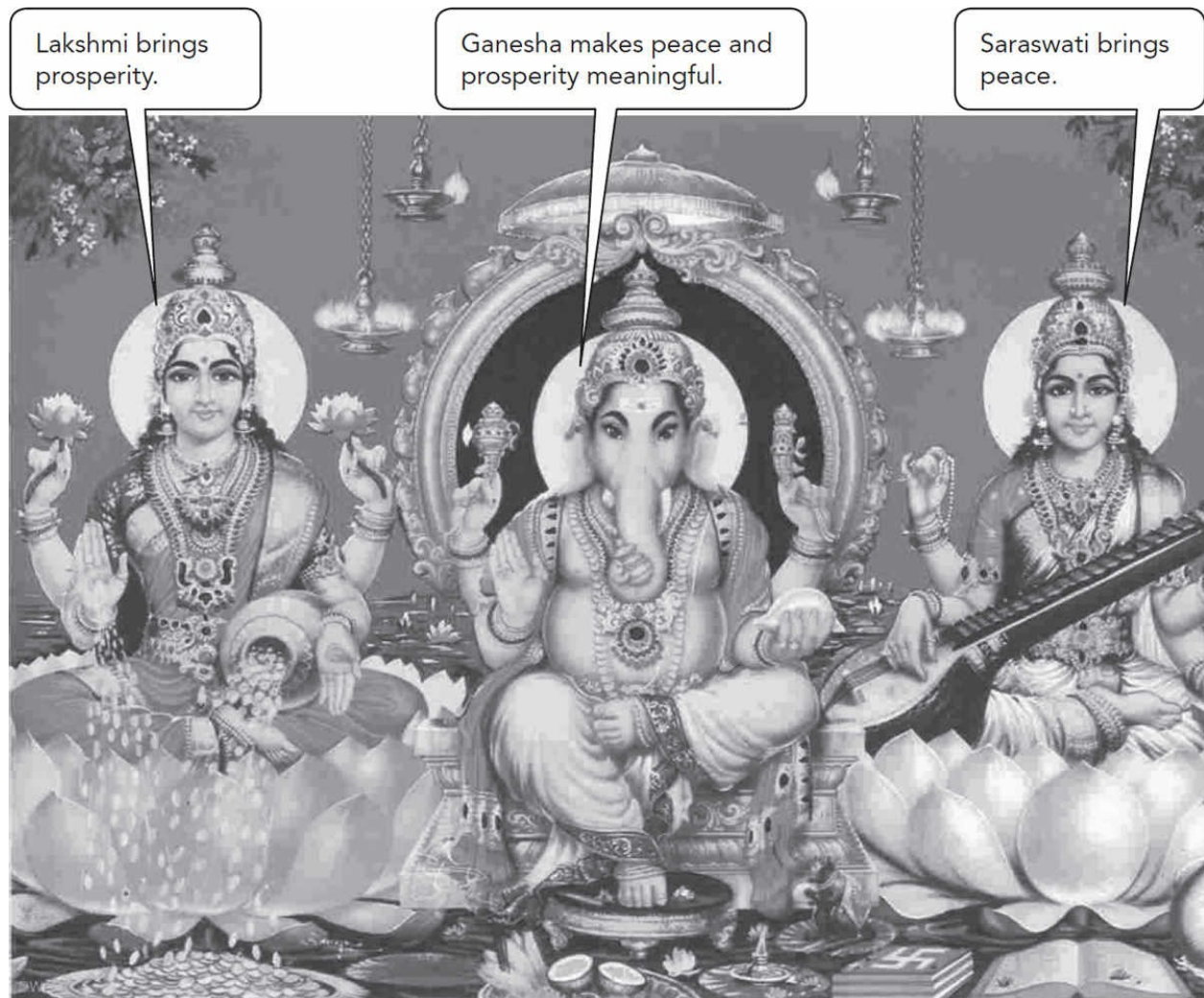
THAT SHIVA GIVES HIS SON an elephant head is significant. Animals never overeat. Humans, because of imagined and amplified fears, end up spending their lives

gathering food like the Yakshas and forget to reflect on the meaning of food. By replacing the human head with an elephant head, Shiva draws attention to human greed that is rooted in fear and that prevents humanity from discovering bliss. With the head of an animal that knows neither scarcity nor predator, Ganesha becomes the symbol of contentment and wisdom. His corpulent form evokes not just power and abundance but also satisfaction.

The elephant whose head is given to Ganesha is no ordinary elephant; it is found by Shiva's Ganas when they move in the northern direction as directed by Shiva. North is the direction associated with the Pole Star, with stillness, hence spiritual wisdom. The elephant is a symbol of material abundance. The elephant found in the north combines both ideas, and so is a befitting head for the son of Shiva and Shakti.

All the Ganas, including the Yakshas, accept Vinayaka as Ganesha, their leader. He makes them reflect on hoarding and inspires them towards contentment. Unlike Kubera whose wives, Riddhi and Nidhi, are associated with material growth and wealth accumulation, Ganesha's two wives, Riddhi and Siddhi (sometimes called Buddhi) balance wealth with wisdom. Siddhi means emotional and intellectual maturity.

In calendar art, Ganesha is shown with Lakshmi instead of Riddhi, and Saraswati instead of Siddhi. The two goddesses, draped in red and white, are associated with wealth and knowledge. If Lakshmi brings wealth, then Saraswati brings peace. The two are rarely seen together. Only Ganesha is able to bring them together. He removes the obstacle to wisdom.



Calendar art showing Ganesha with Lakshmi and Saraswati

Ganesha is said to have two sons, Shubh and Labh, which means 'auspiciousness' and 'profit'. His daughter is called Santoshi, goddess of satisfaction. These are metaphors to indicate that when Ganesha is brought into the house, he removes all obstacles to wealth, peace, auspiciousness, growth and happiness. He does so by enabling the potbellied Ganas to outgrow fear of scarcity. That is why he is their leader. That is why he is Ganapati.

